

05/13/77

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
TELEGRAM

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FROM

AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES

CLASSIFICATION

E.O. 11652:

TAGS:

SUBJECT:

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GDS

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Church and State: Catholic Bishops End Their Silence

SECSTATE WASHDC

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA

AMEMBASSY LA PAZ

AMEMBASSY ASUNCION

AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO

AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO

ARGENTINA PROJECT (S200000044)

U.S. DEPT. OF STATE, A/RPS/IPS

Margaret P. Grafeld, Director

☒ Release ☐ Excise ☐ Deny

Exemption(s):

Declassify: ☐ In Part ☒ In Full

☐ Classify as ☐ Extend as ☐ Downgrade to

Date Declassify on Reason:

BUENOS AIRES 3539

REF: (a) Buenos Aires NOTAL 2766, (b) 76 Buenos Aires 7237,
(c) 76 Buenos Aires 3866

1. SUMMARY. In statement issued May 7 after semi-annual meeting, Catholic Bishops spoke out publicly for first time since military coup of March 1976 in terms of direct and open condemnation of human rights abuses of government. Language was strongest Argentine Church has used, and represents unquestionable departure from policy of quiet diplomacy on human rights which has guided Church over past year. Failure of efforts to influence GOA privately, and increasing frustration of the large corps of moderate bishops, has moved the Church into a new phase in its relations with the GOA. We would expect that Church will wait now to see what response

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CLASSIFICATION

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OPTIONAL FORM 163
(Formerly FS-413)
January 1976
Dept. of State

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20/85

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GOA makes before deciding upon next steps, but we foresee increasing tensions between Church and State. END SUMMARY.

2. Most of Argentina's 4 Cardinals and 80-odd Bishops gathered May 2 through 6 in Church retreat at San Miguel for 35th semi-annual Episcopal Conference. Agenda included purely religious matters, reform of statutes of Catholic Action organization, reorganization of ecclesiastical courts, and review of current political and economic status of country. During meetings, Bishops received Generals Martinez and Jauregui, the Intelligence and Operations officers of the Army General Staff, who offered a briefing on subversion and related subjects.

3. Conference issued pastoral document on May 7, entitled "Christian Reflection for the People of the Fatherland." Statement recalled that after meeting in May 1976 the Bishops had issued a statement (reftel C) which "with respect and humility" had tried to induce all to work together for common good. Since that time Church had followed course of private approaches to authorities and private documents to indicate Church concerns.

4. However, Bishops went on, time has come to make concerns public. They recognized that hidden forces may be influencing international campaign of defamation against Argentina, and want neither to join it nor be used by it. But this risk, they said, cannot prevent them from speaking out. "To be silent would be unfaithful." They rejected

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right of anyone but Church to judge its doctrines, and to try to link priests and bishops with unacceptable ideologies.

5. In its strongest and most direct words, statement said:

"...no theory of collective security, in spite of the importance of such security, can wreck the rights of the person... a mistaken concept of personal or social security has brought many consciences to tolerate and even accept the violation of the elementary rights of man...to admit the legitimacy of murder of the enemy, of moral and physical torture, the illegal deprivation of liberty or the elimination of all those who may be suspected of aggression against personal or collective security..." To overcome this, Bishops called for "...full rule of just law."

6. Going on, Bishops noted principle that for any Christian, including those who exercise authority, "...the end does not justify the means." They recognized the "...terrorist guerrilla which has constantly violated the most elemental human relationships (convivencia)..." They have "...heard many times of the Christian character which the government of the Armed Forces wished to impress upon its effort...", and are forced to remind (them) that the Christian includes in his character a humble commitment to self-restraint.

7. They then list a series of "serious concerns": the numerous disappearances and kidnappings with the lack of official response to appeals, which appears to indicate that

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~~XXXXXXXXXXXX~~ It is ~~isoback~~ that majority of Bishops,

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those who up to this time have been unwilling to openly
accuse GOA, may have taken a new stance. ~~Bishops had been~~
~~almost exactly balanced between liberal and conservative~~
~~positions in relation to GOA~~. Shift of majority to
openly
~~severely~~ critical view of GOA may have diverse affect on
corps of Bishops themselves. GOA has been challenged, and
we expect Church will now pause to see how GOA will respond.
If, as we expect, GOA will not or cannot significantly and
quickly improve its human rights performance, we foresee in-
creasing Church-State tension. Based on the information avail-
able to us, we would expect the Vatican to join and support
this change in Church policy. The so far largely silent
moderate elements in Argentine political life may begin to
speak out more forcefully, hiding behind clerical skirts to
some degree. This probably is a negative development for the
relatively moderate Videla-Viola forces in the GOA. If the
Church is now prepared to indicate that its faith in Videla's
willingness and ability to gain control has now succumbed to
need for Church to declare itself, then almost solid support
for Videla among moderate elements may weaken. At same time,
hardliners in ^{military} ~~readings~~ may be inclined to increase criticism of
Videla's supposed weakness in leadership, which they could
see as encouraging Church to attack GOA. On other hand, Church
stance could help Videla argue with hardliners that human rights
improvements are essential to prevent confrontation with
Church. Opinions differ on impact of Church statement, but all
agree it is important and may open new and critical phase in
human rights situation.

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10. GOA has not yet issued any formal reply to Bishop's statement, and it may restrain itself to counterattacks in ^{inspired} ~~inspired~~ press stories and individual comments by GOA officials and military commanders. Given fact Bishops statement was released on weekend, and most editors would want to wait for some indication of GOA policy on statement, there was little immediate reaction up to ~~morning of~~ May 10. However, La Opinion as early as May 8 had selected harsher criticisms from statement and featured them in "news" rather than "editorial" coverage, ^{while} ~~while~~ La Nacion May 10 carried long editorial/^{attacking Bishops' position.} Paper suggested ~~suggesting~~ in near sarcasm that Catholics who are members of the institutions defending the country may have some doubts about the sincerity of the faith of other Catholics who are inclined to justify violence and crime. For these Catholics outside the hierarchy, "keeping silent would also be unfaithful." La Nacion criticized mentality of those who see no difference between aggressors and their victims.

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OPTIONAL FORM 153A
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January 1975
Dept. of State